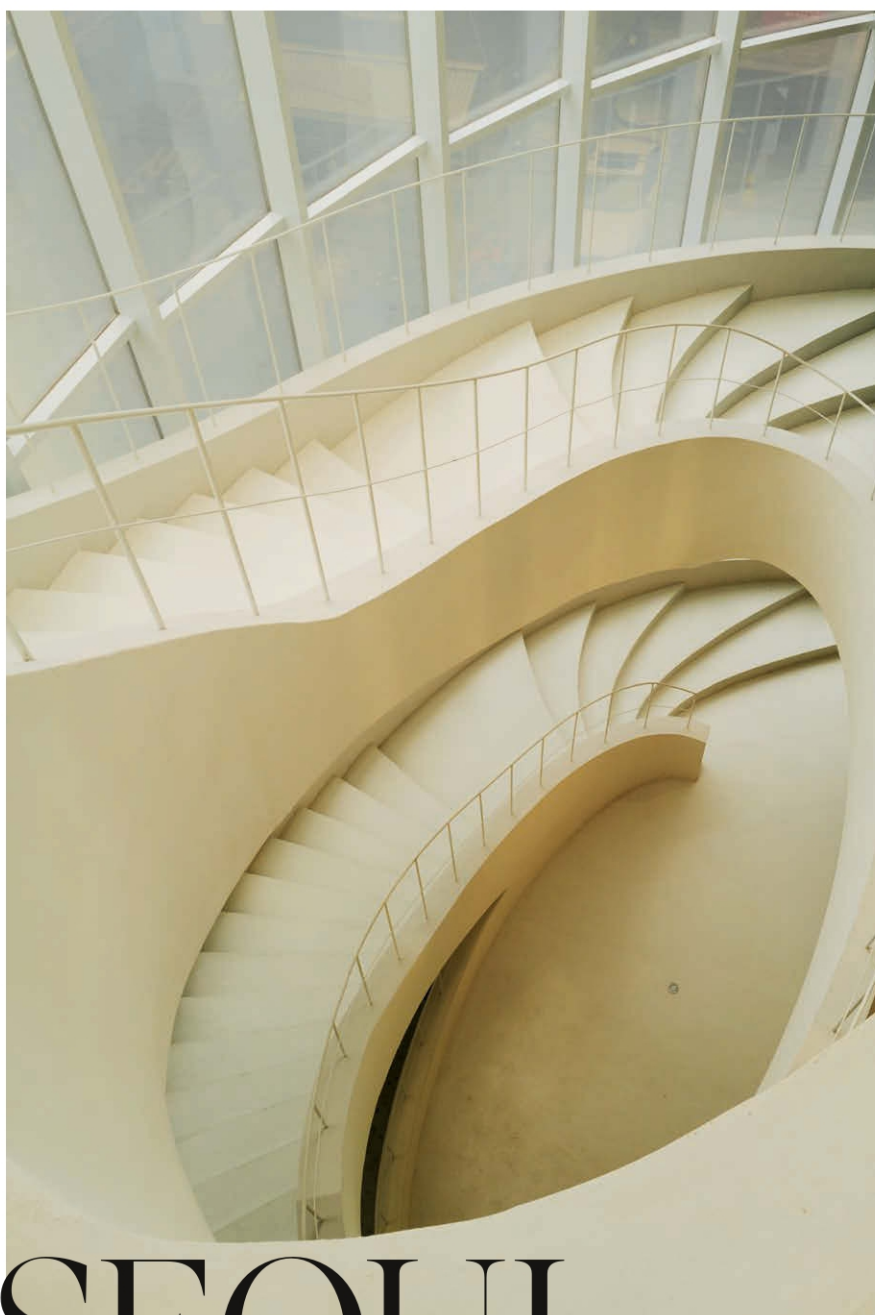




SEOUL PURPOSE

Sophie Hicks fell in love with the South Korean capital a decade ago. Several projects later, the architect still can't get enough. As told to *Victoria Woodcock*. Photographs by *Taemin Ha*

In 2013 I was asked by Jonny Johansson and his team at Acne Studios to come up with a concept for a store in Seoul. Back then, I'd been to Japan a lot. I'd been to China quite a lot. And I'd been to Seoul once before – but in the '90s, when things were run by men in grey suits. And then there was a change. By the time I arrived to create a building for the Swedish fashion brand, Seoul was all zhuzhy. Fun was exploding. On a Friday evening at 5.30, the streets were full of action: people meeting, chatting, going to bars and restaurants. There were department stores with the most gorgeous food halls selling delicious-looking lollipops of frozen strawberries. It had become a slightly bonkers version of Japanese perfection – more outgoing, a little bit more eccentric.

What I quickly learnt was that up until as recently as the 1970s, much of Gangnam was still farmland. I always stay at the Grand Hyatt on the top of the hill. It's got an incredible view down to the river and across to Gangnam – it's packed with cars, with bridges, with tall buildings; it's so full. I look down and think: "That was farmland 50 years ago? That is insane." Understanding the way the city developed, the speed with which it developed, and the very openness of the people, made me realise what an extraordinary place it is.

I started my career in fashion. I loathed school. I left at 17 and went straight to work for *Tatler*, when *Tatler* was a fabulous magazine. It was the late '70s, early '80s; there was loads going on; street fashion was still good. It was exciting. But after nine or 10 years, I thought, "OK, let's get a bit more serious" – and I went to study architecture.

When I work with brands, I want to find out what they're all about. How we dress reflects our psychology. And shops, I feel, are somewhat the same. The external façade is very important. I think: "How do I capture the ethos and the atmosphere of a brand in an architectural environment?" The first shop I designed was for Paul Smith in 1994 in Notting Hill. It was the minimalist era and Paul said, "I want a shop in a house." We decorated everything to the nth degree. Since then, I've worked with lots of pioneering creative directors at the big fashion houses: Alaïa under Pieter Mulier, Givenchy under Matthew M Williams, Mugler and Casey Cadwallader, Bottega Veneta and Matthieu Blazy, and Yohji Yamamoto. Sometimes I design one store, sometimes 100 stores, like I did for Phoebe Philo at Chloé. I've just done the big new Max Mara flagship on Avenue Montaigne in Paris.

I have to find an architecture that accentuates the character of the brand, but I'm also always striving to do something a bit different. I want to surprise and not be obvious. I'd say my work is defined by tension, by the contrast between the light and airy, and the heavy and grounded. The house I made for my daughter Edie [Campbell, the model] in Northamptonshire is a perfect example: it's floating above water on both sides, but inside it feels very solid.

I wanted the Acne Studios store in Cheongdam to exude the cool crispness, slight otherworldliness of Sweden in this very chaotic, busy, frenetic Asian city. I actually designed the store without visiting the site, although I did see it through multiple FaceTimes so that I could understand the location, and a little bit of the vibe. It's surrounded by buildings right and left, with all their doorways, air-conditioning units, signage, telegraph poles, wires all over the place. It's quite crazy, and this thing we made sits behind, quiet, just watching what's going on around. It's completely encased in a translucent polycarbonate that allows a very soft light to gently come into the space. You feel like you're in a white cloud. You can't see out to Seoul, and Seoul can't see into the Swedish world either. They ooze past each other. The structure inside is a whitened box, unbelievably solid; I call it the concrete monster. It's a great brute of a thing. That's the Swedish groundedness.

Quite a lot of Korean companies wanted to talk to us after they saw the Acne Studios store, but nothing came to fruition until perfume brand 025S (or Pointtwofive. Second) got in touch in 2022. The team wanted a building



Sophie Hicks inside the building she designed for Korean brand 025S. The scent bottles are illuminated by a single light fixture reflecting on the curved stainless-steel wall, which floats above the display surface. Opposite: its staircase

to represent their new perfume line. I did a deep dive into the world of perfume and discovered that a successful scent is a balance between the ugly and the beautiful, between the stinky smells from whales and civet cats, and the delicious ones extracted from pretty things like jasmine or roses. The building had to somehow embody this idea. So at the bottom it's dark and dirty: concrete, rubber chippings, asphalt. Then you go up the first staircase into a dream world of the senses. There are no hard corners; misty glass allows only glimpses of the outside world. A sculpture by Korean artist Choi Goen sweeps over the stairs; it looks like a minimal, abstract version of a squirt of perfume.

Weirdly, this project reminds me of something I created as a student at the Architectural Association. I was 29, vastly pregnant with Edie, my second child, standing in front of a panel with an enormous egg sticking out in front of me, holding this big white plaster egg I had made with a carved staircase inside it. The 025S building connects to that.

My practice is four people – and one of them is part time. This means I'm very hands on. I get to really do stuff. Properly. It's very important for an architect like me to have somebody on the ground to take my design and make it constructable – for the 025S project this was Doran Kim, at local firm YOAP architects. She's very good. For all my most recent jobs in Asia – in Shanghai, Tokyo and now Seoul – my partner architects have been women. They've been great to work with – and maybe they'll start designing interesting buildings. I find women are often much less stuck in their ways, more open-minded than men. I worked with a terrific male architect on Acne Studios, but you do stumble upon some who are a bit stodgy, a bit inflexible.

The 025S store is in an up-and-coming part of Seongsu-dong – the so-called "Brooklyn of Seoul". Nice coffee bars are just moving in. There's a lovely shop called Friday Movement, selling clothes and accessories; round the corner is a very nice Japanese fusion restaurant, Jinjak Dining. Every time I go back, there are always one or two new buildings. Seoul doesn't tend to refer to its traditional wooden architecture in its contemporary buildings. There are projects by big names: David Chipperfield Architects' Amorepacific headquarters; Zaha Hadid's Dongdaemun Design Plaza. The Leeum Museum of Art has three buildings, designed by OMA, Jean Nouvel and Mario Botta. It's a cutting-edge museum, with a wonderful permanent collection of Korean ceramics and antiques.

I find that buildings in Korea are either very extreme – a bit too fashionable, and therefore time-limited – or a little bland. I try to strike a balance. I recently came up with a new building for a photography studio on a site near the Leeum Museum – an area where there are very nice, fairly old villas with beautiful old trees. They wanted a design that would be eye-catching but not gimmicky, which is really what I do anyway. I proposed a building on enormous concrete columns, the whole thing suspended; a glass box appears to float above the base, with sweeping views across Seoul. It is a very sophisticated architectural design, so it's a shame that the project is currently on hold.

But I don't think that my work in Seoul is going to end here. It's going to keep chugging along. I love the genuine excitement of my Korean clients. We can be so jaded in the west sometimes. What's really inspiring is how Koreans allow their young people to get on. A lot of the people I've worked for are the same age as my children. They're dynamic; it's so refreshing. Working in Asia, I've learnt that I find it very difficult to control my impulses. I'm very frank. I've learnt it's a mistake. I'm alien and annoying to them. In all honesty, I don't know why Koreans like my work. But I'm very glad they do. ■ HTSI

Hicks in the 025S building (also pictured below). She stands under a sculpture by Korean artist Choi Goen. Below right: exposed concrete characterises the interior of Acne Studios Seoul



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